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Permission to use five (5) photographs and use them for a scholarly article about the discovery and curatorship of *Zinjanthropus boisei* is hereby granted on the condition that: -

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Returning Zinj: curating human origins in twentieth-century Tanzania

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Abstract

The discovery in 1959 of the fossil fragments that would become the *Zinjanthropus boisei* skull propelled Olduvai Gorge, the Leakey family, and the search for human origins into the glare of the world's media. This triumvirate has remained in the public eye ever since, placing the discovery of “Zinj” at the very heart of our understanding of the archaeologists' quest to uncover the deep history of human kind. This article traces the biography of the *Zinjanthropus boisei* skull from its discovery in 1959 to its incarnation in current public discourse in eastern Africa, half a century on. This requires us firstly to resituate the scientific endeavour that brought Zinj to us within its historical context, and then to examine the combination of materiality and iconographic reproduction that has shaped our view of the skull and its story. The experience of the National Museum of Tanzania, in terms of its own wider institutional history and its specific curatorship of Zinj allows historians to critically assess the importance of palaeoanthropology in East Africa in its overlapping local, regional and transnational spheres.

Keywords: palaeoanthropology; Tanzania; Olduvai Gorge; *Zinjanthropus*; national museum

The East Africa of our Origins stories, in the heroically told twentieth-century search for human beginnings in the Great Rift Valley, appears to have little in common with contemporary historical narratives of the region. Yet these two narratives have always been intertwined and connected. This article explores these connections through an examination of the history of the *Zinjanthropus boisei* skull, discovered at Olduvai Gorge in 1959. On 15 July 2009 there will be a Tanzanian celebration that will bring together the National Museums, the Olduvai Gorge Site Museum, the local Maasai, numerous national and international scientists, volunteer archaeologists, and an array of politicians, in marking the 50th anniversary of the discovery of “Zinj”. Protagonists in this celebration hope to utilise the event in the urgent task of developing a national palaeoanthropological infrastructure, raising awareness of this heritage across the nation, and engineering the return of fossils scattered across the world.[1](#)

The notion of “return” now looms large in the Zinj story. Moira Simpson, in her work on post-colonial museum representation, posits two different repatriation experiences: one is the familiar institutional resistance in the name of “Knowledge”, and the other a complex and at times conflict-ridden but productive process. The return of the Lakota Ghost Dance Shirt from the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow to the Wounded Knee Survivors' Association was made possible through a public hearing, lectures and cross-cultural visits, and has resulted in new shared stories, perhaps symbolised by the donation of a replica shirt created by the granddaughter of a survivor of the battle back to the museum.[2](#) The productive potential available in Simpson's discussion of “return” can be combined with James Clifford's call to

return objects to “their lost status as fetishes. *Our fetishes*”.³ Clifford claims that retrieving the enigmatic quality of the object can help us to see a collection or exhibit as something historically produced rather than self-evident truth. In tracing Zinj's post-discovery biography, we must thus denaturalise the opaque history of palaeoanthropology in East Africa⁴. By repeating the skull's physical return to Tanzania - which last occurred in 1965 - with a cultural and historical “return” in 2009, can new questions be raised that might help us to reconceive this rich scientific enterprise in its colonial and post-colonial contexts?

Building upon earlier work that explored Zinj and the Leakeys' story as it was produced in journals such as *Nature*, the *Illustrated London News*, and the *National Geographic*, and in Tanzanian and East African newspapers, this article focuses on the skull's institutional host, the National Museum of Tanzania, to investigate how the fate of the fossil and the institution have become entwined at different historical junctures. Asking about the object leads us to the museum and back again, by way of issues of race, tutorship, and nature, illustrating that the history of the search for human origins in East Africa leaves us all with an ambiguous legacy.⁵

The star exhibit: returning Zinj

In biographical and autobiographical accounts of the search for human origins in East Africa, Zinj usually disappears from the narrative in the early 1960s, after the initial whirlwind of publicity and funding had changed the discipline forever. Some works do mention Zinj's last international journey, however, from Nairobi to Dar es Salaam as a sort of goodwill gesture between the Kenyan and Tanzanian national museums (Figure 1). This much I knew as I flipped through files of photographs stored in Tanzania's National Museum, and even though this has been a story represented visually and with sensation at every turn, it was with shock that I encountered a photograph I certainly hadn't seen before. The grainy black and white image, dated 26 January 1965 and taken at the National Museum of Tanzania, featured three prominent personalities. On the right, a white woman looking awkward, on the left a smiling black man, and in the middle, in a glass box, a not-quite-human skull. All three were familiar to me in my research, but the grouping of Mary Leakey, Julius K. Nyerere and the Zinjanthropus skull just seemed too good to be true.



Figure 1. Presentation of Zinjanthropus boisei skull. President J. K. Nyerere and Mrs. M. Leakey and Zinj, January 26th 1965. National Museum of Tanzania Archives: Museum Ceremonies I.

It turned out, of course, that the “handover” was a staged event for the press to mark both the return of Zinj from the Leakeys and Kenya, and the opening of the museum's new Hall of Man. But the image of the meeting compels us to reconsider Tanzania's response to the search for human origins as something active, if ambiguous. The return of the famous type-specimen from the Nairobi Museum to Tanzania was supposed to signal the movement of the bulk of the Tanzanian fossils back to Dar es Salaam - the reclaiming of a national heritage from the scientific dominance of their Kenyan neighbours. The publicity the handover raised led to “a marked increase in visitation” according to the museum's quarterly report.⁶ Yet, by the time of the ceremony it was already understood that Zinjanthropus was no longer thought to be the “oldest human ancestor”. The Tanzanian Antiquities Department in 1963, for example, had accepted that “Where the skull of Zinjanthropus shows that he was a very

coarse and ape-like creature” the more recent discovery - also made at Olduvai Gorge - of what Leakey had christened *Homo habilis*, “was considerably more refined and much closer to present day human beings”. Accepting Leakey's explanation in *Nature* the report understood “that the stone tools were made by the new sort of man, rather than the ape-like Zinjanthropus”. Without his tool-making ability, Zinj became a “mere” animal in one fell swoop. The report supported Leakey and an aggressive, linear evolution, even further, concluding that Zinj “may, in fact, have been hunted, killed and eaten by the makers of the stone tools”.⁷

Thus deprived of the much coveted “human” status originally granted by Louis Leakey, the significance lent to Zinj's “return” to Tanzania is perhaps surprising. As the Antiquities Department allowed, “Although Zinjanthropus is no longer regarded as the first tool-maker, this famous skull is still of very great importance as a key to the understanding of how man evolved”; but this vague scientific guarantee hardly seemed to justify the public role Zinj played in January 1965 and has continued to play in the National Museum of Tanzania since.⁸ While it is possible that the Kenyan institution only let go of Zinj once the skull had lost its “earliest man” tag, this assumption undermines the continuing potential Zinj has inspired in cultural and scientific representation despite (or perhaps courtesy of) his status as extinct cousin.

It seems that the publicity around Zinj's discovery had been sensational enough to keep him in the public memory, regardless of his scientific standing. Zinj thus still offered ideal material evidence of something recognisably hominid for the new Hall of Man the Tanzanian Museum was opening, and he naturally became its centrepiece. His image and discovery had been splashed across the world in popular visual publications, culminating in the *National Geographic* whose society began to massively fund ongoing work at Olduvai Gorge.⁹ Zinj therefore carried associated value alongside and separate from his scientific position in a constantly revised evolutionary heritage. In opening a permanent gallery with Zinj, and in such a public and international way, the museum was able to use his fame to scientific ends; declaring itself capable of the scientific and museological standards required of the international and well-funded research, and presenting Tanzania as being able to contend intellectually with the concept and implications of human evolution.

The Zinj exhibit became (and still is, with the Hall on the visitor's immediate left upon entering the museum) an integral part of the museum experience. State visitors were often personally guided around the gallery with many guests photographed looking at the Zinj exhibit and skull. And Zinj's presence was integrated into the museum's work and identity through contemporary exhibitions like one organised in 1969 by the Conservator of Antiquities Amini Mturi titled “From Zinjanthropus to Independence” that inaugurated phase two of the museum's development with a celebration of archaeological research.¹⁰ Zinj thus provided a recognisable focal point for looking inwards and tying together seemingly disparate strands of national heritage. At the same time Zinj also provided the museum with international heritage currency; attracting scientists on the one hand and engaging the world's museum community on the other by sending a cast of the skull and commercial *Homo Zinjanthropus* medals, for example, to Expo-70 in Japan.¹¹ Yet Zinj's new home was not a new institution, nor one simply plagued by lack of money or facilities, both characteristics left implied in much of the literature that deals with the origins story from the Leakeys' more Kenyan perspective.¹²

King George V Memorial Museum

The Memorial Museum in Dar es Salaam emerged not from a naturalist collection but from a colonial rhetoric of representation. The museum was opened in 1940. The plaque revealed by the then governor, Mark Young, remains above the door of the old building. It reads:

King George V Memorial Museum, This Museum Was Erected By The Government And The People of the Tanganyika Territory As A Memorial To His Majesty King George The Fifth Whose Reign Is Gratefully Remembered By The Inhabitants Of This Country.

In his speech, however, Young also expressed his disappointment at the wartime failure to represent peoples from all parts of the territory in the galleries of the new museum (Figure 2). The tension between the representative desire driving the small institution and its actual limited reach was to characterise the Memorial Museum's early history and undermined its unspoken purpose of reform. This contingent relationship, between an ultimate failure to represent the whole territory whilst attempting to civilise and therefore construct it, was performed at the museum up until, and perhaps even after, Tanzania's independence in 1961.[13](#)



Figure 2. The official opening of the King George V Memorial Museum. December 7th 1940. National Museum of Tanzania Archives: Museum Ceremony I.

From the start the museum was conceived of from within the trusteeship rhetoric; it claimed to be both for and about “the people” of Tanganyika rather than about its attractive raw materials. The funds collected for a memorial to the late King George V were appropriated in 1936 to build the museum with the voluntary contributions being embedded in a narrative of hierarchical inclusion: “an appeal was made for funds for a suitable Memorial to his long and good reign. The response from all communities composing the Territory's population, especially from the Africans, proved most gratifying”.¹⁴ The reality of establishing and maintaining an institution developed from a European enlightenment rhetoric in a colonial context was less gratifying. The museum was quickly affected by any changes in the Tanganyikan administration, and was continuously beset by staff and volunteers going on leave, being moved to new territories, or accompanying husbands on their tours of duty. The museum opened without a curator at all, already having lost three curators, two British and one French, who had all left for new posts as war in Europe began to take precedence.

Despite this, the 1940 building was established in the Botanical Gardens not far from where the German Kulturgebäude - the previous attempt at a collection - had been, and was clearly conceived with a tutorship role in mind. The interior was designed by Zanzibar's museum curator Nicol Smith and reflected the educational function of the exhibits: “[I]t has been born in mind during its arrangement” she explained “that many of its visitors will be people who have never been in a museum before but to whom visual instruction makes a strong appeal.”¹⁵

This model of the museum as instructor was particularly useful for the illiterate visitor, as Nicol Smith suggested, because it was perceived, as Bennett puts it, as “an automated learning environment - that is as a collection of objects whose meaning is to be rendered auto-intelligible through a combination of transparent principles of display and clear labelling” (Figure 3).¹⁶ The visitor, who was encouraged to ask for explanations “if he cannot read the notices”, was supposed to make an ordered learning circuit of the walls of the museum.¹⁷ With the untutored body of the visitor forming an explicit target of reform, the controlled circuit of the “unordered” African visitor saw the Memorial Museum as an exercise in embodied learning, or as Bennett might put it, “discipline.”



Figure 3. Interior view of the first museum from end wall of one wing looking through to the end wall of the opposite wing. C.1940. National Museum of Tanzania Archives: Historical Areas.

Museums everywhere, however, have found this educational display of an ordered world to be in constant tension with collecting and research priorities. The progressive rhetoric of the Memorial Museum in its reports and articles is only rivalled, for example, by the consistently urgent call to collect, preserve and display ethnographic material that was referred to as, a “past phase”, “rapidly passing”, “fast disappearing”, and “bygones”, almost “lost for ever”. The seemingly paradoxical need for the administration to salvage and preserve in-part-for-whole that which it was attempting to supersede through the colonial project was understood as a museological responsibility. It was far from paradoxical for the professionals involved in the enterprise, however, who through district officers were attempting to freeze for display an entire culture that progress and civilisation were supposedly erasing. Nicol Smith's ideal tribally ordered collection “would have the additional advantage”, she claimed, “that a tribesman would at once see the material possessions of his tribe as a whole and would be able to appreciate at a glance that aspect of his tribal history, which will soon be a past phase.”^{[18](#)}

This glance was intended to impress the African visitor with the expertise of the civilising system and to present the world as given. Petro Mntambo, trained by Nicol Smith in Zanzibar, confirms that the museum was granted privileged access to tribal African pasts. “If you go through a museum”, he suggested:

you see some of the things which were used by your forefathers, which had long disappeared; they have been found only by scientific researches and are displayed in the museum to show the descendents what degree their forefathers attained in the civilisation of the world.^{[19](#)}

The act of salvage is portrayed as evidence of the value of the civilising project but in addition, the “rapidly disappearing” material culture is acknowledged to be such because of the correlated “success” of civilisation. The representation of tribal culture, therefore, was never simply nostalgic, but also impressive in its scientific methodology, and evidence of progress. The museum professional's need to collect and categorise, even when clearly nostalgic, was compatible, therefore, with a rhetoric of advancement because upon completion a collection could be utilised to confirm the value of the colonial project. A *Tanganyika Standard* review on an exhibit of African household utensils expressed just such a view:

With the spread of civilisation - the character of the old African culture is rapidly vanishing, and primitive African household utensils are being constantly replaced by mass-produced Western ware... they often prefer to use the - doubtlessly - more efficient European substitutes, and are thus losing the art of their handicraft.[20](#)

The museum represented itself as capturing an impossibly authentic, Africa, yet the consistently urgent calls for collection right into the 1950s and beyond, highlight the elusive nature of the “whole” ethnographic collection. In 1947 an editorial in the *Tanganyika Standard* referred to Dr Korabiewicz, who was “most emphatic that systematic collection must not be delayed. If it is not done soon all hope of obtaining and presenting a reasonably full picture of the primitive background of Tanganyika's African peoples could be abandoned.”[21](#) This was not simply the rhetoric of appeal talking. By 1963 the revitalised museum reported a worryingly under representative ethnographic department, where despite years of emphasis on completing the ethnographic collection “several ethnic groups have little or no representation in the collections”.[22](#)

The museological failure to capture the territory through the systems of colonial officialdom and to perform the temporal impossibility of fixing African identity, inevitably led to questions about what it was that was happening to contemporary African cultures. The *Tanganyika Standard's* editorial took a positive view:

we consider this transformation, that may well be a tragedy to the ethnographer, to be one of the most hopeful signs of the whole collection. If the Native craftsman can adapt his methods and his materials with such readiness and enterprise he is not doomed to extinction.[23](#)

Unsurprisingly this optimism was not shared by museum staff, and by 1964 the concern was palpable, the museum's ethnographer advocating intervention into the production of “carvings with neither significance nor beauty, and showing only a degeneration of the woodcarver's art” that he suggested “must be vigorously combated”.[24](#) Concerns over inauthentic craftsmanship and incomplete ethnographic collections were perhaps an inevitable outcome of the territorial museum project. If the polluting of African crafts was at least a sign that the civilising project was working, the cultural product of this act which everyone agreed should be “African” inspired - “African culture” claimed the *Tanganyika Standard* in an exhibition review “must have firm, indigenous roots” - was unimaginable for the museum.[25](#) Its framework for representing the territory's peoples and its resources was from the outset hierarchical in a racial sense and this meant that there was little room for African agency without a rupturing of the museum's ordered world.

Prevailing as it did, throughout many colonial regimes in African countries, the underlying evolutionary and therefore “natural” framework for racial and cultural difference was often reflected in a European, Asian, African pyramid of development. Museums were institutions capable of reinforcing this evolutionary framework and the tutorship role bestowed upon the European tip of this pyramid as most “developed” race. Benevolent racial hierarchy appeared in the Memorial Museum's sense of instructive purpose, as seen above, but also in everyday museum management. The visitor numbers in each annual report, for example, began and remained broken down racially until 1953 and in the annual report of 1956, for example, when it complained of a “lack of permanency in responsible members of staff” the report was referring to Europeans who had consisted mainly of “the wives of officers” taking on part-time clerical duties.²⁶ The recruitment and training of African Tanzanians to senior positions was not entertained even at this late stage in the colonial experience and reflected the same general assumptions that saw that African staff were rarely ever named in reports. The first annual report in 1942 claims “an African Assistant” trained in Zanzibar and “three African attendants, at an aggregate cost of 170,-sh p.m.”.²⁷ By 1959, the year of Zinj's discovery, the report reads, “Miss J. R. Harding, F.M.A., F.G.S.” and Mrs G.M. McSpadden, and then simply “African Staff: Carpenter/Handyman, Three Attendant/Messengers”.²⁸

The hierarchical assumptions that saw this division of staff as natural and African participation in the museum as incidental rather than productive also provided the framework for the exhibition of material culture. The history gallery in the 1950s described nineteen hundred years of the region by focusing first on the coast, with input from Greeks, Arabs, Portuguese and Chinese.²⁹ The second section featured “Exploration of the Interior”, and the third “German East Africa”. History appeared to begin through contact with outsiders and headed towards British rule, with African representation largely confined to ethnographic displays instead.

This appropriation of history was not confined to the history gallery, however, but pervaded the museum and its representation of “the African” as a separate category. In an exhibition of paintings from around the territory in 1950, which Governor Twining claimed “marks a milestone” in cultural development, art was praised: “some really beautiful, others somewhat amateurish, a few indicative of African interpretation”. The categories of beautiful, amateur, and African were reinforced in the *Tanganyika Standard's* editorial which commented on the training clearly had by some painters, the self-taught nature of others who might benefit from some instruction, and lastly, “[T]he African exhibitors quite naturally express themselves in their own way, which is as it should be”, once again placing “the African” in a “natural” and fixed hierarchical relationship with other “races”.³⁰

The museum, whether through staffing, visitor surveying, displays of history, ethnography or contemporary art, thus provided an experience of visual and embodied instruction effected to confirm an evolutionary framework with which to make sense of the present and recent colonial past, while the late King looked on benevolently from his state portrait. That a pseudo-evolutionary racial hierarchy was experienced across institutions in colonial territories is hardly revelatory, but the very precise context that these specific regionalised experiences provided for the easily universalised search for early man has been almost entirely overlooked.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that The King George V Memorial Museum's representation of the world outside its doors did not involve drawing upon the internationally valued natural history and wildlife for which the territory was becoming famous. While hunting, wildlife,

and stone tools being recovered at Olduvai Gorge referred to activities and resources valued by growing western interests in conservation and preservation, they were increasingly voiced in a rhetoric of universal human value. The potential impact of these universalised narratives upon the highly specific and instructive identity of the Tanzanian museum, must have seemed, at best, decidedly ambiguous. An article, probably by Gillman, in the *Tanganyika Standard* as early as 1942 claimed that the natural exhibits consisted of soils, geology, timber, maleficent insects, and “Native Poisons”, but “[A]s far as Tanganyika's fauna is concerned, the policy of the museum does not favour many of the usual game trophies.”³¹ Yet, this was in marked contrast to many museums already established on the continent.³²

The Coryndon Museum in Nairobi, where Louis Leakey became honorary curator in 1941, was a relative latecomer to the naturalist tradition predominant across the British empire. Built in 1929 as a memorial to the late Governor of Kenya, Sir Robert Coryndon, the museum was inspired by his interest in nature and natural history and developed out of the East Africa and Uganda Natural History Society. Virginia Morell, a biographer of the Leakey family, refers to Coryndon as “a keen naturalist” but in his work on nature and empire John MacKenzie qualifies Morell's characterisation of the Governor when he describes Coryndon's shooting of what were thought to be the last two white rhinos in Mashonaland and his sale of the rare mounts at inflated prices to museums in Tring and Cape Town.³³ The Coryndon Museum dovetailed this hunting legacy with the newly developing interest in “conservation” and African nature for a settler audience, only opening to non-whites with Leakey's curatorship in the 1940s.³⁴

In contrast, the development of Tanganyika's reserves and the Leakeys' work on prehistory at Olduvai, were not deemed part of the educational or ethnographic institutional project at the Memorial Museum. The globally reported bones and stones being discovered at Olduvai Gorge failed to be of significance to the museum till later partly because the Leakeys had long been taking discovered material over the border to their base at the Coryndon Museum, and partly because its seemingly paradoxical implications - of both African achievement and a simultaneous universalising or appropriation of African heritage - could not easily be accommodated by the museum's tutorship identity. It was not until 1956, more than twenty years after the Leakeys started work at Olduvai Gorge, that the new curator J.R. Harding complained that the prehistoric section “of the Museum is still inadequate and quite out of keeping with the importance and interest of this subject in Tanganyika”.³⁵

On the other hand, the Kenyan museum's tradition, facilities, and growing expertise in precisely this area may have been responsible for its proposal for regional specialisation within British East African museums. This proposal only re-emphasised the very different purpose of the Dar es Salaam institution, which Gillman reasserted in response:

the Museum must serve as an educational influence for the people of the Territory, and it is felt that this would not be achieved, under present circumstances at least, if there was so rigid a specialisation that a student wishing to obtain a cross-section of Tanganyika had to go to several neighbouring territories before he could complete it.³⁶

This act of territorial independence characterised the museum's development up until and after national independence, providing the new Tanganyika government with a model for an educative national museum despite clearly being a colonial legacy. This “territorial” identity of the museum was cemented in the late 1950s as the institution became more professional

and self-aware. It developed relationships with other museums in Kenya, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia and South Africa, for example, and curators attended conferences across the continent. Tanganyika's African context became more evident in its acquisition of books that ranged from exploration narratives to archaeological histories of the continent, and new ethnographic exhibits suggested a shift from “tribal” to “African” organisation in displays of “African face ornaments”, for example, and “African games”.³⁷

Trained curators Harding and later Stanley West brought knowledge of international museological standards to the museum and reviewed the hotch-potch systems of cataloguing developed over the years by temporary volunteers. They also began to publish articles on their own research - Harding had six short pieces on Tanganyikan archaeology published in *Man*, for example - and used headings in annual reports like “Visiting Expeditions” that integrated the museum into larger, territory-wide research networks. Similarly, the museum's board included the Government's Antiquities Officer by 1957 and Chief Adam Sapi - one of the first Africans appointed to the Legislative Council - by 1958, reflecting the government's attempt to develop a tangible territorial identity for Tanganyika. Most significantly came discussions of a Museums Service that required the museum “[T]o collect, preserve and exhibit objects illustrating the Pre-history, history, ethnography and natural history of Tanganyika for the purposes of education, and research.” A new development plan responded, at least in part, to the gap perceived between the world class discoveries gaining fame throughout the world - pictures and reconstructions of the “giant” prehistoric animals from Olduvai Gorge had featured in the *Illustrated London News* throughout the 1950s, for example - and the museum's inability to represent them. A growing interest in archaeology was reflected in new regular “Prehistory” sections in the annual reports from the 1950s which recorded occasional donations from the Leakeys but also pieces from Clark Howell's excavation at Ismilia River in Iringa District and Ray Inskeep's work at Kisese, Kondoa District.³⁸ Now, when the curator went on a collecting trip this encompassed both ethnographic and stone age material and the prehistory displays were extended, albeit slowly.³⁹

Dar will see that skull

It was in this context that in October 1959 the *Tanganyika Standard* reported “Dar will see that skull” and a plaster cast of *Zinjanthropus boisei*'s palate was “sent down to Dar es Salaam” by Louis Leakey.⁴⁰ The Memorial Museum had no curator at all between September 1959 and October 1961, just as *Zinjanthropus*, the Leakeys, and Olduvai were propelled into the world media via the *National Geographic*, in “The World's Earliest Man”.⁴¹ Suffering from its ongoing colonial staffing problems the museum still managed to develop a display for the palate cast and in January 1960 Leakey brought the fully reconstructed skull to the museum. Leakey was on hand to explain the skull to visitors, and in the five days Zinj was on show over two thousand people came to see him and the visit's success inspired a new Olduvai Gorge exhibit featuring photographs of the skull and the later Hall of Man with its Zinj display which incorporated *National Geographic* images of his excavation (Figure 4).⁴²



Figure 4. Zinj's display arranged by Chief Technician Mr. E. Cutler 1965-66. National Museum of Tanzania Archives: Museum Display II.

Rather than remaining content to act as Leakey's new periphery, however, the Memorial Museum was aware that its position as a cultural institution entailed a growing responsibility whether in the territory or the independent nation. "The development of an adequate Museum service in Tanganyika" claimed the annual report, "is essential to keep pace with the educational and cultural needs of the emerging nation," and the development plans were approved - with the old building being retained as the King George V Memorial Museum - in early 1961 as Tanganyika moved rapidly towards full independence in December. Significantly, "keeping pace" included a recognition that, as the report put it, "Tanganyika occupies a unique position in the scientific world by virtue of the all important discoveries of fossil man in Olduvai Gorge." By 1962 the annual report argued that the National Museum should become a "centre for research and study concerning the past of man and his environment. The present development of the Museum was begun with this very much in mind".⁴³ Negotiations with the Coryndon Museum had begun in 1961 to engineer the "return" of Olduvai material and, despite the admission that there was as yet very limited space for display and that, "[T]he eventual disposition of the originals of these unique fossils is not yet decided", the report registered a forceful claim for the hominid specimens: "but technically they are the property of the Tanganyika Government".⁴⁴

It was a year later that the new National Museum of Tanganyika was officially opened by Vice President Kawawa. In her work on the history and development of Caribbean museums, Allisandra Cummins suggests that, as “key sites for the imagination and presentation of national identity, and of officially-accepted national histories”, National Museums are as much about “the creation of the nation (and by extension of national identity) in the present and in the future as they are to reconstructing the past”.⁴⁵ In the new National Museum of Tanganyika's reports the past was addressed in descriptions of the museum's history and in the retaining of the old colonial building within the new development.⁴⁶ The new building, on the other hand, represented new investment and links with the nation through visits and donations made by the new Prime Minister and later President, Julius Nyerere. “Uhuru” was celebrated, for example, “at the request of the Prime Minister” with a “special display of the gifts presented by the representatives of various nations present at the celebrations.”⁴⁷ This was followed in later years with diplomatic gifts like those given to him after the war with Idi Amin and with the freedom torch used at the union with Zanzibar in 1964. The museum organised celebratory nationalist exhibits for the annual Saba Saba festival and began to be visited by state guests as an ideal introductory tour to the country (Figure 5).



Figure 5. His Royal Highness Crown Prince Carl Gustav of Sweden studies the Zinjanthropus skull, November 1969. National Museum of Archives: Museum Ceremonies I.

In assessing the use of museums by “newly independent governments”, Cummins argues that they “gave recognition to the symbolic power of museums, renaming them to reclaim national histories” but also that “little changed behind the scenes to make viable the authority mandated to these entities”; however, in Tanganyika there was a concerted effort to Africanise professional and managerial staff at the National Museum.⁴⁸ Perhaps in contrast to the National Museums of Kenya where Richard Leakey expressed concern at his father's continued employment of an expatriate secretary and at the fact that in 1968 the highest ranking African was a ticket clerk, expatriate staff funded by external organisations like the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) in Tanzania were understood to be temporarily in charge while Tanzanian employees like Fidelis Masao and Wembah Rashid

undertook training abroad.⁴⁹ Masao was employed as Education Officer but became Assistant Curator and undertook his Masters and PhD in the US and Canada, and Rashid became trainee ethnographer and studied in Ghana and the US.

When Masao became Curator and Rashid Chief Ethnographer the annual report boasted, “the Museum has been manned by nationals, a situation which had been aspired to for some time” and while training in North America and across Africa meant frequent absences of staff the Africanisation of the service was not limited to museum personnel but extended, significantly, to the exhibits themselves.⁵⁰ New exhibition practices emphasised function rather than tribal affiliation where “each showcase will display one subject generally known throughout the country as opposed to concentrating on one tribe only”. Exhibits of drums, canoes, and stools, for example, attempted to reverse the tendency to display African material anthropologically rather than historically. This trend, that sought to normalise and diversify rather than fix the label “African”, existed within the new national context, however, and was as much a part of an attempt to construct the nation as it was an effort to more “truly” represent it. For as “the tribal aspect is being discouraged”, claimed the new annual report, “emphasis is now on the cultural patterns of the country as such so as to elevate national cultural value”.⁵¹ For Saba Saba festivals the museum designed exhibits that aimed to “show the skill and excellence of Tanganyika village artists as a whole, identifying them as Tanganyikans rather than as members of any particular tribe”.⁵² The museum was used to register voters, with the queue joined by Vice President Kawawa and Maria Nyerere, and Julius Nyerere's donations, like his plain wooden desk used in pre-independence TANU days, served to function as emblems of an idealised state.⁵³

The museum was articulated professionally as having a dynamic role in the construction of the state, with the ability to transform both the colonial representation of African agency in the territory *and* the nation's evolving self-perception. When he became Chair of the Board of Trustees, Tanzania's leading historian Professor Isaria Kimambo pointed out that “we have inherited this colonial institution in a colonial context” but argued that it could still “play a revolutionary role in interpreting the history, culture and education of our Nation”.⁵⁴ Another leading national historian, Abdul Sheriff, has claimed that East African historiography has been so bent on recovering African initiative that it has resulted in part in an “African isolation from the mainstream of human history” where children visiting national museums are unable to learn about other cultures as they can in developed countries.⁵⁵ There was, at least in the initial post-independence years, an attempt by the National Museum of Tanganyika to embody this ideal, however. The temporary exhibition list, for example, was long and diverse and included a centennial commemoration for Mahatma Gandhi, an exhibition of moon rock donated to the President by visiting American astronauts, and a commemoration of the Soviet “leader and founder” Lenin with material from the Soviet Embassy. These temporary exhibitions not only brought snapshots of the world to the Tanzanian visitors of the museum but also placed the museum itself in a hopeful museological context that promised an international future.⁵⁶

These positive developments took place of course in a difficult context of running a small museum with a national remit. In 1969 the new technician J.T. Jacobs had to design entire galleries without archaeologist or palaeoanthropologist expertise and replaced the original archaeology gallery with a permanent historical exhibition - a layout that has changed little over the years. The museum thus lost its chance to contextualise the process and settings of archaeology and construct links with more recent history. The Hall of Man, in beginning to be the receptacle for anything archaeological or evolutionary - that we see in references to

dinosaurs and natural history in recent displays - appeared to equate archaeology with the stone age.

Crises in funding and expertise and ambiguous responses to archaeology have been played out across the museum exhibits but, while restrictive, these conditions did not entirely prohibit development in museum and heritage management. The Antiquities Act passed in 1964, for example, regulated the movement of protected objects and declared that they “remain in the country or are returned to the country on completion of study and analysis”.⁵⁷ Mturi, the first national to be Antiquities Conservator, in 1964 negotiated with the *National Geographic* for the right to hold simultaneous press conferences that announced palaeoanthropological discoveries to the Tanzania media.⁵⁸ Realistically, however, the only active palaeoanthropological or archaeological research to be undertaken by Tanzanians had to be funded by external sources. For Masao to do field work on the world famous rock paintings at Kondoa-Singida and Kondoa-Msia required grants from the Foreign Office and the US based L.S.B. Leakey Foundation. Grants from the Commonwealth Foundation, Ford, and organisations like the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), DANIDA, and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) proved useful for training, conferences, and the occasional field trip for Masao and the ethnographers at the museum but they could not provide for long-term museum development.

As other national and independent institutions were developed with specialisations and local involvement, the role of *Zinjanthropus boisei* at the National Museum, and the Dar institution itself, has become more ambiguous. At Olduvai itself, for example, the small site museum established in 1970 between Mary Leakey, the National Geographic Society, and the Kenyan and Tanzanian museums services, has been updated with funds from the Getty Foundation. There, unlike the Hall of Man in Dar, the Leakeys are addressed textually and pictorially as part of the story of unravelling humanity's past, rather than its spokespeople. While John Paresso, who has worked at the site museum for nearly 20 years, admits that Tanzanians haven't been particularly interested in this type of history in the past, he claims that more Tanzanians are now making the long journey to the remote area. Paresso points out, as an example, that even though only two to three school parties visit Olduvai a month, this is in comparison to one or two a year as recently as the 1980s.⁵⁹

A further shift in the National Museum's identity must have occurred with the 1987 establishment of the Natural History Museum in an old German Boma in Arusha to be near to Olduvai Gorge, Laetoli, and the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater. It was proposed in order to store, research, and exhibit the “hominid and faunal remains from Olduvai Gorge now in Nairobi” in addition to instigating work on archaeology, zoology, botany, ethnography and environmental studies.⁶⁰ And yet, despite this museum's official responsibility for natural heritage, the fossil most associated with the search for human origins in Tanzania has remained in Dar es Salaam, disconnected from the new facilities in Arusha. But Zinj's residence in the museum's strong room in Dar has not been an oversight. Not only have scientists regularly come to Dar es Salaam to study the fossil, he has become a repeatable icon in representing Tanzania itself. Just as he features prominently in the museum leaflet, Zinj appears on websites advertising Tanzania, and is referred to in some capacity in almost every safari brochure. In a picture on a website for Africa Rural Education Network, for example, his familiar disembodied skull floats above a familiar landscape photograph of Olduvai Gorge. Just like the picture, the information accompanying Zinj's image is often disembodied from his scientific or historical significance, and is often scientifically incorrect

(he was not “the earliest man” for example); instead of a fixed scientific fact he becomes a symbol of a loosely defined Tanzanian and world heritage.

Given this, Zinj has a surprisingly small role in the Hall of Man today. Efforts to present a scientific and anonymous display without recourse to sensationalism reduce his significance in the Family of Man. “There is no clear evidence” concludes the Australopithecine section that refers to Zinj, “that they were tool-makers”. Whereas the displays at the Olduvai museum attempt to illustrate archaeology as process, in Dar the globalised focus of the older exhibits make no attempt to contextualise Zinj's discovery, or its scientific and popular impact. And yet, like his repeatable image, the fossil's continued stay in Dar es Salaam suggests that Zinj has become more than scientific specimen.

While his display may have been destined to dusty obscurity in a large and better funded research institution like that in Nairobi, freed from our linear evolution the Zinj skull has engendered a new and ambiguous character able to cross boundaries; like those separating the scientific and the popular, the colonial and the post-colonial, and the regional and the national. Failing to materialise as the spearhead of a mass “return” of fossils and artefacts to Tanzania, Zinj has been developed as a unique national icon in diverse representations, ranging from an appearance on an Independence Day stamp and symbol of scientific patriotism, for example, to more personalised appropriations on business cards of curators.⁶¹ Zinj's scientific ambiguity - as an almost-but-not-quite human ancestor - and the ambiguous benefits of the research into human origins - as internationally marketable rather than a heritage close to the hearts of the people - have meant that he has not been permanently appropriated by any particular group or interest, whether in the name of the “Nation” or the “Museum”, but instead finds his image recycled at regular intervals.

In palaeoanthropological circles Zinj has been co-opted as a personable symbol of the discipline's twentieth-century development, appearing, for example, on the front cover of *Four Million Years of Hominid Evolution in Africa* - a collection of papers from a conference held at Arusha in honour of Mary Leakey - in which the first picture inside shows Leakey at the Zinj plaque at his discovery site during the conference. Cassian C. Magori in the preface - before appealing to the government to address the country's scientific infrastructure problems - describes the importance of the “epochal discovery of “Zinjanthropus”⁶² and J.D. Clark in his biographical piece confirms Zinj's role in making Olduvai Gorge famous: “through-out the archaeological world, and far beyond as the place where the search for our origins was fired anew in 1959 by Mary Leakey's discovery of the robust Australopithecus known affectionately as 'Dear Boy' or 'Nutcracker Man'.”⁶³ Even if there is little historical exploration into how or why this particular fossil skull has become so iconic, it is clear that Zinj's scientific significance has been combined with the historical significance of his discovery so that he now symbolises an East African era of disciplinary development where later projects were more interdisciplinary, more renowned, and much more well funded.

While Zinj has been recuperated as a scientific emblem for a thoroughly international Olduvai, his position in the National Museum over the years highlights both the reality of inadequate facilities for accommodating more substantial collections, and the museum's strategies for development and use of its “unique heritage”. After thefts and gallery closures at the museum the Hall of Man was reopened, looking much as it has for the last few years, for the 50-year anniversary of the museum in 1990 by President Ali Hassan Mwinyi with Richard Leakey as one of the speakers. Less cutting edge than the 1960s exhibition the

gallery represented the museum's ongoing if unsatisfactory attempts to survive as a national institution.

As we have seen, Zinj began his career in the museum as an, albeit scientifically ambiguous, star attraction in the human origins display. While his significance in human evolution was minimised in the new display, however, his position in the wider concept of museum has remained paramount. In the museum guide he is one of only two objects photographed, the other being the Rolls Royce Nyerere had inherited from the last governor of Tanganyika. Tours still stop and point out the cast of the skull, and secondary literature recommends the museum on the basis of Zinj's presence there.

In the current House of Culture process that the museum is undergoing a 2003 photo' shoot of the stakeholders looking through the museum's stores "rediscovered" Zinjanthropus and pictured him with a famous television presenter.⁶⁴ He was marshalled forth as a famous and significant specimen but from and for the museum context rather than that of palaeoanthropology or even human origins. Surprisingly, considering his rather anonymous role in the Hall of Man today the familiar image of his skull has even been appropriated in the museum's new logo which features prominently on the museum's website, so that Zinj now advertises the nation's cultural, historical and political, as well as scientific treasures. As old and new visitors come to the museum in its new guise as interactive, community-oriented House of Culture in the coming years, how will they conceive of this icon? Probably more culturally familiar with Zinj through stamps, leaflets, guides, and now logos, how will they perceive the Hall of Man's seemingly paradoxical minimising of Zinj in humankind's evolution?

Happy birthday to a very old man!

There is another, current evocation of Zinj that illustrates the playing out of international palaeoanthropology in the specific setting of Olduvai Gorge. It provides both the Tanzanian museums and those of us with an interest in origins narratives more generally with an opportunity to perform a "returning" of Zinj's post-discovery biography in its diverse forms, to the skull and to our understanding of human origins narratives in a very particular period in East African history.

On 17 July each year Zinj's discovery is celebrated down at the plaque at the original site. A procession of museum officials, scientists, local Maasai, local staff, students, and volunteers from abroad make their way to the plaque where speeches formally commemorate the discovery in the larger context of Olduvai's palaeoanthropological significance and local history. The occasion is organised by the Olduvai Landscape Palaeoanthropological Project (OLAPP) which has been working in the gorge since 1989 and represents a multi-disciplinary team of researchers working under the auspices of New Jersey's Rutgers University, the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, and Tanzania's Open University. Addressing Tanzania's weak palaeoanthropological infrastructure OLAPP claim that the "expatriation of the great majority of fossils and artefacts has left Tanzania without the laboratories, specimen storage facilities, and curatorial staff to accommodate and care for the materials"; forcing trained Tanzanians to go abroad for full time work.⁶⁵ Co-directed by Fidelis Masao, the national museum's first African curator, OLAPP's contributions illustrate

ongoing and transnational responses to this situation: they have built laboratories on site and, in Arusha, established Tanzania's first comparative collection of vertebrate bones; trained local excavators and fossil identifiers; and provided doctoral fieldwork for Tanzanian postgraduates for the first time.

As part of OLAPP's work the Zinj day celebrations include speeches from representatives - in three languages - from the Government, the National and site Museums, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, and local Maasai (Figure 6). The diversity of those cheering in response to one of the director's conclusions in 2004, "Happy birthday to a very old man!", attests to the varied investments the different parties have in the research, from scientific significance to local employment, and national pride to marketable heritage. At Zinj Day in 2004, for example, the Oldupai area Maasai Chairman Sarimu Alaltakaka claimed, "we're appealing to researchers and foreigners to foster the co-operation between scientists and Maasai so we can keep this heritage for future generations." Despite the years of brought-in Kikuyu and Kamba workers and difficulties with cattle grazing the chairman drew attention to attempts to involve local people, applauding "the efforts of present-day researchers to include the Maasai". The National Museum representative, on the other hand, claimed, "for us from the National Museum the discovery of Zinjanthropus has completely changed our history - the discovery has been taken on by our national identity"; while Dean of Douglas College at Rutgers University on a tour of Tanzania suggested (to much applause) that "what we're really celebrating is the sameness and the commonness of all of us". It is the, albeit uneasy, coevalness of these very different interests in human origins in a world famous and yet locally contextualised palaeoanthropological landscape, that can challenge the timelessness and universal character the Gorge often embodies when it is represented as epic "cradle".



Figure 6. Zinj Day speeches at the FLK site where *Zinjanthropus boisei* was discovered in 1959. July 17th 2004.

OLAPP have proposed to the Tanzanian Government that the National Research Board and the museums use Zinj's golden jubilee in 2009 as a rallying point for training scientists and curators, for developing better education for the public as well as tourists, and for encouraging the return of Olduvai material from around the world.⁶⁶ According to Masao only 15 out of 70 potentially lucrative hominid type specimens discovered in Tanzania remain there, with 10 of these down to the organisation's recent work.⁶⁷

It is possible that together with proposals for education, training, fieldwork, and employment, the calls for "return" in the context of Zinj's Golden Jubilee might well result in some objects being sent to Tanzanian museums and laboratories. But there could also be a different kind of

return, a sort of historical re-engagement with both Zinj's long biography and the colonial and postcolonial contexts of his discovery and curatorship. This unique event presents historians with an opportunity to open up and critically assess the official narratives that will be revisited and honed for the occasion - and perhaps those generated by the year-long celebration of the 150 years since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* too - and to invite counter and complicating stories into the history of evolutionary fieldwork. It is our responsibility to ensure that history is on the agenda and that we do not overlook the diversity of experience embedded within the search for human origins in East Africa.

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Masao, F. T. Interview with the author, September 1, 2004, National Museum of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam.

Mturi, A. A. Interview with the author, August 1, 2004, History Department, University of Dar es Salaam.

Parezzo, John. Interview with the author, July 18, 2004, Oldupai Site Museum.

Notes

1. The term palaeoanthropology refers to the study of ancient humans, as used by the Olduvai Landscape Paleoanthropological Project.
2. Simpson, *Making Representations*, 228.
3. Clifford, "Objects and Selves," 244.
4. I work with Ute Röschenhaler's term "object biography" here. Röschenhaler, "Of Objects and Contexts," 90 and 84.
5. Staniforth, "Becoming Human"; *Idem*, "Representing the World's Earliest Human".
6. National Museum Quarterly Report, February 1 to April 30, 1965.
7. Anon., "Quotations from the Annual Report of the Antiquities Division for the Year 1963," 197. It is thought that Zinj was male, but there are doubts. My use of pronoun is a contingency in order to recreate the sense of this skull representing an (unknowable) individual, as opposed, I hope, to a lazy generalising of "mankind."
8. Anon., "Quotations from the Annual Report of the Antiquities Division for the Year 1963," 197.
9. Leakey, "The Astonishing Discovery of 'Nutcracker Man'"; *Idem*, *By the Evidence: Memoirs*; *Idem*, "Finding the World's Earliest Man" *Idem*, "A New Fossil Skull from Olduvai"; *Idem*, "The Newly-Discovered Skull from Olduvai".
10. Annual Report, 1968-1969.
11. Annual Report, 1969-1970. Note the use of *Homo* at the exposition, when *Zinjanthropus* had never been scientifically classified as such, and since 1964 had officially been demoted from direct human lineage.
12. In, for example: Cole, *Leakey's Luck*; Leakey, *By the Evidence*; Morell *Ancestral Passions*; and Willis, *The Hominid Gang*.
13. Gillman, "Report," 6.
14. Gillman, "Report," 5.
15. Nicol Smith, "Report Concerning Museum's Start," 8.
16. Bennett, "Speaking to the Eyes," 26-7.
17. Whitlamsmith, "Ukumbusho wa Marehemu King George V," 13.

18. Nicol Smith, "Report Concerning Museum's Start," 9.
19. Mntambo, "The Founding," 21 and 22.
20. Anon., "Review of Monthly Exhibition," 38.
21. Anon., "Museum Picture," *Tanganyika Standard*, 39. The *Tanganyika Standard* had been in production since 1930 and was in the same Nairobi group that produced the fairly vitriolic *East African Standard*. It reflected the views of the much smaller and less entrenched white population in Tanganyika. Sturmer, *Media History*, 53-4.
22. Report of the National Museum, July 1, 1963 to June 30, 1964.
23. Anon., "Museum Picture," *Tanganyika Standard*, 39.
24. National Museum Report, July-October, 1964.
25. Anon., "Museum Picture," *Tanganyika Standard*, 39.
26. Report, July 1956-December 1957.
27. Annual Report, 1942.
28. Report, January-August, 1959.
29. Annual Report, 1954 and 1955.
30. Anon., "Art Exhibition," 61-2.
31. Anon., "Tanganyika's Museum," *Tanganyika Standard*, August 8, 1942.
32. As attested to in Sheets-Pyenson *Cathedrals of Science*.
33. Morell, *Ancestral Passions*, 123, fn 2; MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, 39.
34. Morell, *Ancestral Passions*, 135.
35. Report, July 1956-December 1957.
36. Anon., "Tanganyika's Museum," *Tanganyika Standard*, August 8, 1942.
37. Report, January-August, 1959.
38. Report, July 1956-December 1957 and Report, January-August, 1959.
39. Annual Report, for the year ended December 31, 1958.

40. Anon., "Quotations from the Annual Report of the Department of Antiquities for 1959," 154.
41. Zinjanthropus also featured in several *Illustrated London News* articles, in *The Times*, and *Nature*.
42. Anon., "Quotations from the Annual Report of the Department of Antiquities for 1959," 154.
43. Museum Report, January 1, 1962 to June 30, 1963.
44. Report, September 1, 1959 to December 31, 1961.
45. Cummins, "Caribbean Museums," 241.
46. The curator Stanley West described the museum's historical development in "The National Museum of Tanganyika," 163-6.
47. Report, September 1, 1959 to December 31, 1961.
48. Cummins, "Caribbean Museums," 224-245.
49. Morell, *Ancestral Passions*, 337 and 296.
50. Annual Report, 1969-1970, and Annual Report, 1972-1973.
51. Annual Report, 1970-1971.
52. Report, July 1, 1963 to June 30, 1964.
53. Annual Report, 1970-1971.
54. Annual Report, 1974-1975 and 1975-1976.
55. Sheriff, "Encapsulating History," 161-2.
56. These exhibitions perhaps also reflected the ambivalent position Tanzania occupied in the Cold War arena in these years.
57. Mturi, "Protection, Preservation," 94.
58. Mturi, interview August 1, 2004.
59. Paresso, interview July 18, 2004.
60. Annual Report, 1977-1978, 1978-1979, 1979-1980.
61. Tanzania's withdrawal from the New York "Ancestors" exhibition and seminar in 1984 is often conflated with Richard Leakey's decision to withhold Kenyan specimens because of fossil safety. Fidelis Masao, however, remembers the phone call relaying President Nyerere's

decision to boycott the event due to the presence of South African delegates just the day before flying out. Masao interview, September 1, 2004.

62. Magori, "Preface."

63. Magori, "Preface." Clarke, "Mary Leakey," 1.

64. "Reporter's Visit at the National Museum," *Daily News* (Tanzania), July 14, 2003.

65. Masao and Blumenschine, "Progress and Prospects," 3.

66. Masao and Blumenschine, "Progress and Prospects," 5.

67. Masao, interview September 1, 2004.

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Figure 1. Presentation of Zinjanthropus boisei skull. President J. K. Nyerere and Mrs. M. Leakey and Zinj, January 26th 1965. National Museum of Tanzania Archives: Museum Ceremonies I.



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